

The 'Upstate Issue'

Primer:

Buffalo, the Media Alliance, & the Emergence of a Surprising New Decentralized Media Discourse.

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by Tony Conrad

A. Background—The Upstate Media Conference and Media Alliance

The Upstate Media Conference series was initiated through Squeaky Wheel here in Buffalo, and the first "out-of-Upstate" visitor was Lisa Overton, who was at that time a Media Alliance staff person. She was actively associated with organizing efforts for the following Upstate Media Conference in Rochester. Then there was a third Upstate Media Conference, which was in Ithaca, and this time Media Alliance took the position of actually co-sponsoring the conference with Cornell Cinema and Squeaky Wheel.

In its 1986 New York City Annual Conference, Media Alliance also included an Upstate caucus, and then there was a continuing Upstate presence during the rest of that Conference. Armin Heurich and Bob Doyle are Upstate Board Members, and I was the keynote speaker at the 1987 Annual Conference.

B. Management seminars—Business in the Arts

In the last four or five years there's appeared a kind of confidence—which one never would have seen in the '60's, certainly, and not so much in the '70's either—a kind of confidence in business structures, and a reliance on management expertise as a source of some sort of operational strength that the field needs. I tend to concur, with two real strong reservations.

The one reservation is simply theoretical. I'm on the board of directors of an alternative art space, Hallwalls. In that connection I started hearing this kind of management strategizing when we got an "Advancement Grant" from the NEA. So I did a mess of research at that point—some reading in management, background information in managerial psychology, and so forth. I thought, if we're going to get into this I'd like to know something more about the answers. And what I found, to my bemusement, but also predictably, was that there really aren't any "answers" that there's no clear single strategy, although there is a kind of elementary "how to" set

of procedures (just as there is a kind of assured effectiveness in the Dale Carnegie course). These sort of overall approaches are best, I think, in setting people's minds in the right direction, and getting things started, and once you get past that point there really are no specific ANSWERS. It depends upon the circumstances. So that's a major theoretical reservation.

Then the second real reservation I have is a more specific one. I think that

actually in the last year or two there's been a little bit of disillusionment with the management solution, as a universal solution (sort of like some kind of paint that you slap on and everything looks perfect). I've sensed that especially (ironically, I might say) in relation to New York City organizations, where perhaps the movement has been the strongest and the experience has worn thin a little bit in one way or another. I don't know the details, but as we begin to get a stronger impression of it out here in the sticks, it seems to be weakening a bit at the core, as a panacea.

In any case, the problems that define the circumstances for us out in the periphery I find to be quite different from the defining circumstances in the megalopolis—especially for the media community.

C. Five Communities—Independent Media and Its Four Adjacencies

Well this gets right to the heart of things, for me. I see the media makers, and the community of Media Alliance, as surrounded by four general forces, which mix down differently depending on where you are situated geographically.



D. First of All There's the Intelligentsia

The art community, the people who are concerned with political issues, and with reading books and with doing good things, and all that kind of stuff. That's a community that is obviously very strong in New York City, and in fact is large enough to represent a demos, a demographic sector of the city.

Although most of the media organizations that distribute independent or alternative work are largely reliant upon an audience drawn from this particular community (I'm calling it intelligentsia, but I'd say the artists, the makers themselves, students, people who are politically and poetically concerned)—and although this group in effect composes The Audience, currently, for most of the work that we're involved in making and presenting, in most areas this intelligentsia turns out not to be a very sizeable community, so it looks like you're going out for an elite audience or a very special-

lized audience—whereas in New York City you may have a quarter of a million people who fill this bill.

That's a sufficiently large bloc that you can really begin to think about doing marketing and outreach, and all of these things that are intended to be demographic, that are intended to be statistical operations; and reach people in significant numbers, even though it may be the biggest untold secret of your entire enterprise that:

The Audience really is the makers themselves. I think that this is a truth that is very difficult for the community to accept, because it's basically poison from a political point of view.

E. Audience Development—The Answer

The answer to audience development, if it be known, will have to do with the development of a maker community (and a community that reads (writes) about making, and is involved with issues, and so forth). And it's no accident that a lot of the highest level of activity in the outlying areas is in some way ancillary to (or dependent on, or involved in some way with) universities and colleges, and other institutional activities in these communities. That doesn't make any sense from the perspective that's dominated by the wisdom that we're basically dedicated to reaching something called "the community."

In fact, some of the major differences in results, where it comes to outreach and development, between New York City and Upstate communities—or let's put it this way—between communities in New York City or L.A. and everywhere else, is the difference in the demographics of how big the intelligentsia is in those communities (and in short whether you have to call a spade a spade, or not). Out here, we can see that the Audience really is the people who are involved. In New York I don't think that's nearly so clear.

F. Second of All There's The Business Community

There are three other communities that we're in contact with. One is the business community. Of course, that's different here, too, because we don't have the television business here nearly as strong as it is in New York, so Buffalo does not ride the capitalization waves of the industry. I don't know where things stand right now, to be candid. But if there were one thing that I were to be attentive to from a New York City perspective—it would be to find out what the TV industry is doing to recapitalize in its own equipment in New York City. I'm leaving that up to the New York City people to figure out, but if they haven't thought of that they certainly should, because the On-Line program and other initiatives that have brought industry and the independents together in the past have really largely been completely coincidental with, and perhaps (I'm suggesting) because of, overcapitalization in the industry. You know, the industry overcapitalized in equipment, to produce for the presumably-onrushing market in cassettes, and in cable, and in discs. Yeah. And I remember when this happened, and then the next thing was that everything went bust—but instead, we had On-Line.



Heather Connor & Mary Esbjornsen

G. Media Alliance's On-Line Program

So there's a very important relationship there, and I think that On-Line was a significant accomplishment of Media Alliance in sensing larger trends, and finding ways to establish accommodation between two communities: the entertainment business community, and the independent production community.

In New York City, On-Line was a fantastic solution for everybody. It had manifestly exactly complementary results when you look at it Upstate and Downstate. In the City, it professionalized the independent community. From the vantage point of the weaker communities Upstate, it basically shut them out, and to a large

degree shut them down. It's those same years when we lost half of the Media Alliance membership Upstate. The major organizations Upstate died.

Synapse in Syracuse, Portable Channel in Rochester, Media Study here in Buffalo; there are problems in Owego; I mean all over. In some degree that has to be traced to the fact that privileged patterns of video production, dependent on the use of special homemade computers and homemade assemblages of gear, were suddenly obsolete. Because people could go into a real TV studio.

H. The "Upstate" Issue—Keeping the Controversy Alive

When I first talked to Mary Esbjornsen, the new Director of Media Alliance, when she was coming into office, she said she'd like to salve our wounds and make friends, and that we should have a very cordial relationship between Upstate and New York City. I said that I felt that was probably not such a good idea; that I saw an enormous benefit to all of us in a kind of healthy antagonism between the two. My interest is basically in both of these communities. As a professional, I identify very clearly with New York City. I lived in New York City twelve years. That's where I founded my career. I don't hate New York, nothing of the kind; but the problem is that if New York City solutions are antagonistic to development Upstate (which is a metaphor for the rest of the country, really—New York City is the anomaly, although it doesn't seem that way), if New York City solutions don't work Upstate, then New York City will inevitably pursue a policy which will isolate it increasingly from reality.

I. Third, There Are the Government Agencies—NYSOA, NEA

Where I see that reality harshly reflected--the bottom line--is in the government funding agencies. And that's politics; and if the media community cannot distribute itself over the state, then state funds will vanish for it.

I don't think it's that powerful. The independent industry isn't that powerful, to keep NYSCA funds flowing in the absence of Upstate activity. This may not be the case for the painting market, which is powerful as a high-volume business; but the independent media community is not that strong. The strength is in the dominant media industry; let's face it.

J. And Fourth, There Is the Community of Ordinary Individuals

If the media community wants this free ticket to keep on, then it has to actually deliver services to people, and that means people Upstate. But the conditions are radically different Upstate. The needs are different, the expertise is different.

People simply cannot be approached in an atmosphere where you're suggesting that people will be "educated," and that by some mysterious process of understanding, in a sort of delirium of Freudian psycho-analytic resolution, that they will become inspired by media art, realize its com-



Cheryl Jackson, coordinator of June 11th discussion held at Sunship Communications & Hallwalls, is joined by Reggie Woolery, Media Alliance, and Ed Cardoni in the garden at Squeaky Wheel.

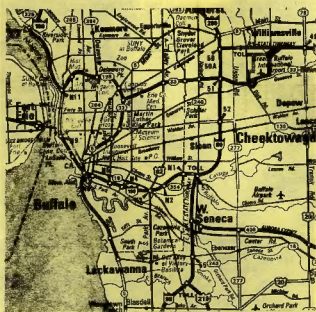


plete superiority to television (or whatever the local devil is--I mean, television is now not such a devil, but whatever the devil is at the moment), and that they will participate, or support, or do, or whatever it is.

K. The Devastation of the Ordinary Individual Maker Audience

You know, it's a very simple truth that just as when you work with students, or when you work with people in a community situation, you have to start with the things that they're interested in. You start with them, where they are, and you don't presume that their interests are different from what they really are, and that they want to do something different from what they already want to do.

And if, in fact, the only people who are doing anything, who are interested, who will go to a show, who will turn on *Alive from Off Center*, or whatever it is, are people who are already involved in making, then you've got to look at what that maker community already is. Now, because of the policies of New York City, in the last ten years that incoherent community has been devastated. Because of the policies of New York City, that community has been devastated. Because of Statewide policy overall, of the whole culture industry.

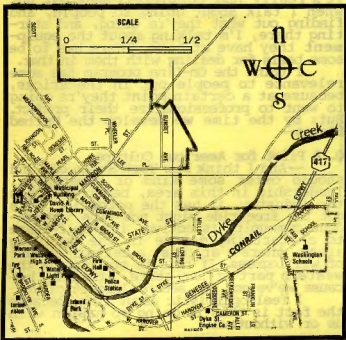


non-makers here; it's colonialism. It's like a colony. And it's a very small colony, and it does not grow. It doesn't mean very much to people here. I say to them, "You better start to know somebody who is actively involved in making, because it's the only way you're really going to focus your attention on this stuff."

M. Buffalo—Seeing Both Sides, Having It Both Ways

The New York model of who is a maker can only be a model if people do it, and participate in it. Now Buffalo is big enough; some of us do. We've got three or four people here who are showing in New York. But still, Buffalo is the fulcrum between New York and the rest of the world. It really is. We're right in the middle. It's like a case study.

And our strength is in standing in for the rest of the world, because we can understand and see New York so clearly. If



L. Colonialism—The Audience Unmasked

I personally love it when NYSAC sends up Tony Oursler, and Michael Smith, and Ed Bowes, and Dara Birnbaum, and all these different people--and filmmakers too, Ericka Beckman, and so forth--send all of these people up, and I go and I sit in the Audience with five other people--or twenty; I mean we're doing better now; maybe we're up to thirty, you know. But boy, it's just wonderful. It makes me feel great.

It's like the last stop on the IRT, but you're paid to go there. So once a month my friends have to go to the last stop, and they get off, and I spend the day with them.

So that's really marvelous, but it does not benefit the community of ordinary



Tony Conrad

services are delivered in each county and all that kind of thing—if those factors are important; then we've got to be talking about real people out there.

N. The Independent Media Criterion: Anti-Quality

Now those real people are exposed to a very centralized entertainment industry, and they have no way out of that. I know A.I.V.F. is working on that, to try to get independents on TV and so forth. But when you get Alive from Off Center delivered out in the boonies, it doesn't mean anything more to those people than any other program, by the time it's been refined to that degree.

You know that the kind of thing that they're looking for in Alive from Off Center is not stuff that is not impressive, they're looking for stuff that is **extremely** impressive. They want **quality** work. And what the people need to see out there is stuff that does not represent quality. The **quality** work means, by definition, something that not everybody could do. And by the time you get somebody who never saw video art before looking at something that is picked because they could not do it, it's no role model for anybody. If you have an available role model for black people, it won't be a kind of black people that people could never get to be. It has to be somebody that they could get to be. I think that the same logic prevails for us, even though, ironically, we're talking about an immense majority.

O. The New Condition—The Equipment Industry and Active Viewers

The key, as I see it, is in the fact that there's another industry that is actually revolutionizing the populace out there, and that's the equipment business. The other day I polled the students in my production class—I asked them how many of them actually had VCR's at home—and every hand went up. And I had to tell them that ten years ago, when I began teaching in Buffalo and I asked, one hand

went up.

It's really changed.

Now, half of them have two VCR's at home. That means they can "edit." And a sizeable number of them have cameras. So the place is being flooded with equipment; people can do this stuff, but they aren't going to get a tip as to what they can do. They're not getting a tip through any program—any program—available under the State Council, except possibly for some of the local workshops and regrants—to a dozen people a month.

These circumstances are coming into being at a pace faster than we can develop the discourse about it.

P. The Equipment/Entertainment Industry Collision

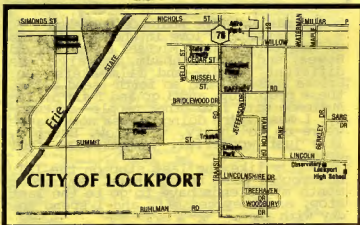
So I see this as a basic conflict where you have many many people (a populist situation) that are engaged with the consumer **equipment** industry, and who are disaffected from us (that is, the independent community) by their premature and presumptive identifications with the **entertainment** industry. They don't see any connection between us and the entertainment industry, or if they do see one, it's illusory. They think that we're making music videos; it's really vague. You can't imagine what people's imaginations do to the independent media community out there. It's really just completely mangled. But when I talk about going to people, and finding out what they're doing, and starting there, I'm talking about the **equipment** they have at home. There has to be some basis for dealing with them in that.

I think the On-Line program has some relevance to people out in the sticks, because at a certain point they're going to want to professionalize their product. But: by the time we develop the United States—

Q. A Pilot for American Culture

--And I think New York State can and should offer some kind of substantial leadership in this area, because it has the industry, it has the potential, it's got the free ride right now—the independent community is active, it's self-aware to a startling degree in the outlying areas, there's at least a certain amount of willingness. If this is starting in the western part of the state, it's only because we've got the second largest city—

I feel optimistic about this, because the fact is this is going to happen with us or without us.



R. The Wide-Angle Picture of the Future

The question, as I see it, for Media Alliance is: can Media Alliance concoct the kind of leadership for the independent artist community that can offer us **survival** in a new era, dominated by the mass audience of amateurs that is about to emerge? If that's possible (and I feel optimistic about that too), then we need to have some strategies that we can evolve for Upstate that would be extendable to other parts of the country.

I don't think that the same thing can be done in New York City. I think that these are different types of demographics, and there are different kinds of community needs; there are different kinds of television service; there's a different kind of awareness of what culture means; and all of these things.

The project is getting equipment to people.

S. Providing Equipment

The NYSCA equipment-supplying model has been a sort of end-user model; that is, you buy this equipment—period. You buy it, and you put it out there, and you see what it does.

That's not what I want to suggest.

What we need is to put new equipment out there only **because it will generate more equipment** out there. It must be like a virus. If it cannot be established that it functions like a virus, then it shouldn't happen.

It helps that we no longer need to offer access to recorders, because people have recorders. We should offer some kind of access to cameras, simply as a lure, because that's where people are at right now: they want a camera. The next step, and the one that makes us progressive, is: what people **don't** know that they need, but what they are desperate for, is **editing**. At the present level of operations, which is very modest, this equipment would not be what makers in New York City want—they do not want amateur editing equipment.

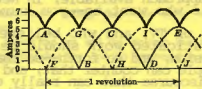
So it's very important for us, Upstate, to say to New York City, "We **insist** that you should load up trucks and send up your old equipment, up here to us." And we need to find a way to use that equipment as seeding in these communities. Of course this is dangerous, and people will say it's been tried before (with new equipment), and you know there have been problems, and the Council has been burned; and they believe it won't work. But the fact is that there has never really been a clear approach put forward; there has never been a demographic base like there is now in terms of continuity with home equipment.

Right now, the industry has not arranged for people to edit at home. The technology will be there in a couple of years, but it would be fantastic if it were possible to begin to offer some kind of primitive editing to people in a community where that represented leadership of those people who are already involved with equipment: because that's going to pipeline them right into our hands. If we can offer editing to communities out there, Media Alliance will be an organization with a hundred thousand people in it.

That's quite a different vision than the one that New York City makers have projected. Of course, I think that their position is very tentative.

T. The New York City Maker—A Demoralized "Majority"

I think that they're looking toward the entertainment industry, and that their anxieties are very appropriate. It's a position of weakness—politically speaking. It's **defined** as a position of weakness, and I can see that the maker with those aspirations, and who finds himself in that situation, may feel threatened by the fact that there is the possibility of an environment with a million video makers by the end of the next ten years. I could see that as very threatening, because then you have to look at a particular maker's work, and you say, "Well, what actually does make John Sanborn's work special?—I mean that special?" And I can see that then the technology is one answer; but as



far as conception, and offering some kind of distinct alternative, it gets iffy unless people are really working hard at that.

Now that, on the other hand, is precisely the area where the independent community has exercised itself to offer leadership for a long time. It's very good at that, at **precisely** that; and if it cannot bring itself into a position of leadership with respect to this large number of people, it'll **just be forgotten**.

Which is the area where the independent community has been able to exercise leadership? In finding something distinctive to do. Technological leadership is offered by the business community. That's obvious. You can't beat out star wars technology, you know.

U. The Great Accomplishments and Strengths of Our Field Overall

But the independent maker has established **several different bodies of work**, over the course of time, each of which is extremely distinctive, and which are so different as to be almost mutually exclusive in their appeal, in their character, in their reliance on technology, what they ask of the viewer, and their whole critical approach. So I'm not interested in any one critical approach, or any one style.

I'm not interested in trying to be in favor of documentaries and against art, or in favor of narrative and against abstract work, or anything like that. Because all of these constituencies are too little to fight, right now, and they're especially little because they're growing littler, to the degree that they're not prepared to get together and offer leadership.

There are going to be a lot of independent makers, and there's room for a big, big new media alliance. And if we would like to see the people who have really done something over the course of the last 20 years placed in a position that's appropriate within our culture and our society, then it's important that this Media Alliance be **that media alliance**, and not be swept aside by a new generation which sees nothing before it except to organize, all from the ground up, because nothing's been done.

V. Revolution from the Periphery.

So this is why I'm really attracted to a progressive stance. Even so, in terms of Up- and Downstate, I don't think these issues are going to sink in for City people. Because Upstate is very weak, you see. On the other hand, it's always from the periphery that a revolution takes place.

So we can see all of this happening, but it's hard to explain, and people's self-interest is not really on that side in New York, and their habit of approach is different. So they are a perfect foil for creating a dialog, a discourse, because there is a strong discourse available, but people have to have a sounding board for being able to figure it out. It's important that we have this sort of dead-head approach available, in New York City people who want to--you know--get

their work on TV; and who believe that more sophisticated work should be more like television, and so forth--so that the Upstate people can counter that, and there can be a discourse that can really excite people, rather than turn them off because there's nothing going on.

W. Non-Equipment Needs for Upstate--Travel and Communication

I think this is very valuable; I think this antagonism is an issue, and if there's anything that's been needed, it's some kind of an issue that can vitalize the community Up-state. In fact, the only thing that the community Upstate has in common overall is its issue with New York City. What it needs, to overcome that single-mindedness, is two things: it needs discourse, and it needs support. The discourse has to take the form of transportation money (to facilitate people's meeting with each other) and newsletters.

If you can believe it, after the Rochester Upstate Media Conference, Media Alliance said, "We have free postage and free telephone, and we would like to help you organize the next conference." Postage and telephone calls! They are really important, and there's almost no way to justify these things--travel, newsletter publishing, phone calls, and postage.

These are Upstate concerns; they are not Downstate concerns. If I were still living on Ludlow Street, I would not be in favor of transportation money. I would say that's stupid! I understand that; and yes it would appear stupid--and even antagonistic to downstate concerns: because up here, the thing is, what you want to do is you want to take the money out of artists' fees and give it to the transportation budget. People can not be paid very much to get their work on the air, or anything like that.

X. Frank Rebudgeting

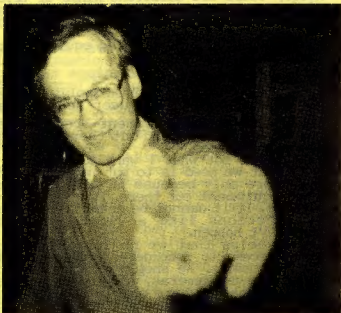
I know this sounds wrong, because we all want to increase fees for artists and all of that. The State Council, everybody wants to increase fees for artists. I would like to decrease fees for artists.

I would say we need the possibility of showing a lot of stuff for free on public access cable. A lot of people are going to be worried we're not sustaining a realistic financial profile, and so forth. Well, OK, what we need is an **articulable double standard for artists' payments.**

Y. Snapshots of Media Alliance

Media Alliance is the only organization that over the course of time has really taken an active interest in the total picture: in being active Upstate and Downstate. Certainly through Lisa Overton and subsequently through Robin White in particular, it's had a history of creating some kind of discourse; of orienting itself so that it becomes a vehicle, a host, for issues.

That has been, I think, extremely significant to the community up here. It's allowed a lot of the dialog to develop; it's encouraged people to think. A lot of the kinds of things that I'm saying are



things that I also hear other people saying up here--even people who I haven't discussed these things with before.

In any case, Media Alliance needs to be the kind of organization that can host these issues. Now the situation is mature enough that if Media Alliance were not to play the part, well, something else would have to happen; that would be the beginning of Media Alliance fading out of the picture.

The community here is awake. There's more activity. Students used to move to New York automatically; now they can't afford to. All kinds of things are fostering a sense of increased relevance.

Z. Fundraising

We can legitimately expect that companies who are involved in equipment manufacture are going to be putting a lot of money into this kind of stuff in the coming time. One of the things that Media Alliance should be concerned with is fundraising. If I were involved with fundraising right now, I would be looking to equipment manufacturers. I'm talking about consumer equipment manufacturers. I'd be looking to the people who are going to be making editing systems for the consumer in ten years.

Those people need allies. They need people who can understand the U.S. polity, who can reach into it and produce results--and who can make things happen, and who can create networking on a domestic level. Couldn't we define a new independent media community that way?